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Did Mani Travel to Armenia?*

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Abstract

This paper will present new evidence to resolve a long-standing problem in the biography of Mani, the founder of Manichaeism, who lived in Sasanian Iran during the third-century A.D. There are a number of important early references to Armenia in Manichaean texts. These include a Sogdian account of how Mār Gabryab brought the religion to Armenia and contains the earliest known literary reference to the name of the capital city of Erevan; and various notices of Mani's own *Letter to Armenia* in Arabic, Middle Persian and Sogdian. But the principal focus for this paper is to resolve the question as to whether Mani himself travelled to Armenia in the early/mid 270s A.D. The account of his final travels, before his imprisonment and death under King Bahrām I in Gondēšāpūr, has been the subject of sustained debate since late antiquity. The early Christian polemical tradition represented by the *Acts of Archelaus* (ca. 330 A.D., extant in Latin, with parallels and elaborated traditions in Greek, Syriac etc.) placed him in the mysterious Castellum Arabionis near the border of the Roman Empire, and in the 19th-century it was common to locate this in Armenia. However, discoveries of primary Manichaean texts in Coptic and Middle Iranian languages in the 20th century turned attention to sites in Mesopotamia. This paper aims to reconcile these accounts and will utilise a newly-edited Coptic source to demonstrate that Mani did, indeed, travel to Sasanian Armenia in the company of a local nobleman named Baat.

Keywords

Mani, Sasanian Armenia, Erevan, Manichaeism, Mar Gabryab, Baat, Castellum Arabionis

This paper is concerned with a focussed historical question: did Mani (ca. 216-277 A.D.), the 'founder' of Manichaeism, travel to Armenia during the years of his public mission; most particularly, during the early to mid 270s

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A.D. in the course of his final travels and before his imprisonment and death under King Bahrām I in Gondēšāpūr? I put to one side the many broader questions, such as the nature of Mani's teaching and his self-conception, the exact chronology of his life, the detail of the territory and governance of Armenia during this period of conflict between the Sasanian and Roman empires. All of these things are important, but constraints of space necessitate a tightly-focussed approach. In brief, we know that Mani was brought up in a religious community in early Sasanian Mesopotamia, that he spoke Aramaic, and that he declared himself to be called as an 'Apostle of Jesus Christ'. It is also certain that the years of his maturity, and the early missions by the apostle himself and his foremost disciples, coincided with the height of the Sasanian ascendancy over Armenia dating from the victorious campaigns of Shapur I through to the later treaties with Rome (250s to 280s A.D.).[1]

The Manichaean historiographical tradition perceived a marvellous synchronicity between the divine revelation, the start of Mani's public mission and the crowning of King Shapur as confirmation of the apostle's election and status. These events were drawn ever closer together so that, in the source utilised by Ibn al-Nadīm for his *Fihrist*, Mani revealed himself on the very day that Shapur became king. It was a Sunday, the first of Nīsān, and the sun was in Aries (probably April 240 A.D.). The young apostle embarked on a series of extensive travels, including a voyage to India; although his base seems to have been the urban environments of Babylonia, including Ctesiphon, Wēh-Ardahšīr and the cities along the Tigris south to Mēšān. He sought to propogate his teachings and to strengthen his followers through a series of writings that became the scriptures of the community. Public debate with other religious teachers and sages was a characteristic practice of both Mani and his disciples, utilised to spread the church; and the hagiographical tradition records numerous miracles and the conversion of kings at the courts of the realm, including that of Turān. One of the core claims made, as to why this new church was superior to all those that have gone before, was that it had spread to all points of the compass.

[1] For background, see Dodgeon/Lieu 1991; for discussion of dates and borders, with further references, Maksymiuk 2015.

It is difficult to place Mani's journeys in chronological sequence, and to disentangle the strictly historical from the fabulous; but his life and those of the first generation of disciples were characterised by remarkable travel and missionary endeavour. We hear of terrible journeys through mountains and storms. In the enigmatic text *Salmaios' Lament*, which, I think, contains some very early material, there is a strange travellers' tale about a sea-voyage and a whale that implores mercy. Elsewhere, there are reports of how a leading disciple Addā converted the queen of Thadmōr (i.e. Zenobia at Palmyra). A famous legend tells of how Mār Ammō confronted and passed by the spirit of the border to the east and entered Kušān. In the Coptic kephalaion 77 it is astonishing to find Axum listed among the four great kingdoms of the world. In these first generations of mission and success it must have seemed that this new revelation had spread to every country.

The influential work known as the *Acts of Archelaus* (ca. 330s A.D.) provides valuable information. Despite a fierce polemical stance, authentic elements of the process can be identified. In the background to the frame-narrative is the account of how Mani, having heard of the illness of the king's son, presented himself as the one who could cure the boy. Both before and after this event, the text stresses how he had sent disciples out to various regions of the world. Now the story begins with Mani having escaped from the prison of the Persian king to a certain Castellum Arabionis, 'the fortress of Arabion'. There he hears of the virtuous reputation and fame of Marcellus, a rich and leading citizen of Karchar across the border in the Roman Empire. He hopes, we note, to seize the entire province if he can win over this one man. Thus, Mani writes a letter to him, as an apostle of Jesus Christ, and sends it in advance of his own arrival via a disciple of Addas named Turbo. When he arrives there are a series of public debates with bishop Archelaus. This is a carefully-crafted work. We find all the relevant details: Mani's presentation of himself as a physician; the mission-focus on the local king (Marcellus takes this role); the writing of letters and sending of disciples; the contests with rival wise men and religious leaders (here it is Archelaus); even the crossing of borders and the mapping of new territory.

Evidence regarding Armenia: (1) Mani's *Epistles*

Ibn al-Nadīm preserves in his *Fihrist* a list of the titles of the apostle's *Epistles*, where we find letters (amongst many others) to places, such as India, Armenia, Edessa, and Hatta on the east Arabian coast. In the *Acts of Archelaus* Mani prepares for his visit with a letter. In contrast, scholars commonly assert that the letter to India was written after his journey there, to bolster a community that had been established. However, this is purely hypothetical as we have no significant details of the content.[2] Equally, without the text itself, all that a *Letter to Armenia* can prove is that there was a mission there during Mani's lifetime; not whether the apostle himself had journeyed there. The existence of this work (eighth on al-Nadīm's list) is confirmed by the Sogdian text M915.[3]

Evidence regarding Armenia: (2) The Greek *Mani-Codex*

The text entitled *Concerning the Birth of his Body* is the most extensive repository of community traditions about Mani's life and travels that is known at this time. The best preserved portions are in the earlier part that details the apostle's upbringing amongst the 'baptists' and his break from that sect. The account of his adult life and public mission coincides with rapid deterioration of the textual remains. Nevertheless, in one episode[4] it is clear that Mani travelled from Media to the city of Ganzak in Atropatene or Azerbaijan.[5] Here there were already members of the community and he performed the healing of a girl. Later in the text, but now in a very fragmentary section, it appears that Mani is in Persia when he is visited by someone from an Armenian city; although the place is named,

[2] *The Great Letter to India* is the third on al-Nadīm's list, for which see, e.g. Reeves 2011: 115-119. It is also cited in the Middle Persian text M1221, ii, 8-9 (see Sundermann 2009).

[3] M915, V13: *Letter to Armenia* (*'rmyn* (*f*)[*rwrtyy*]). The citation concerns the 'five gifts' (see Haloun/Henning 1952, where there is the first edition but only a partial translation). There is also a citation from a letter of Mani's to Armenia (*'rmyn*) in the Middle Persian text M1524 V3, according to Boyce 1960: 73 (again, no further published details, but the extant text is minimal). See also Sundermann 2001: 233.

[4] CMC 121, 6-15 +ff.; cf. Koenen/Römer 1988. Mani's travels in Media and Parthia are also referred to in the Coptic kephalaion 76.

[5] Placed in Ādūrbādāgān, according to the Middle Persian *Šahrestānīha ī Ērānšahr*, 58; cf. the edition by Daryaee (2002: 16-21).

only the final letters can be read for certain as -(*i*)*sthar*.[6] None of this proves that he himself visited Armenia, but it would not be improbable.

Evidence regarding Armenia: (3) Mār Gabryab at Revān

A Sogdian fragment of the mission-history recounts the conversion of a king of Revān (*ryβ'n*) by Mār Gabryab.[7] Werner Sundermann identified this as the earliest known reference to the city of Erevan under its present name, although he argued that the king in question was at most a commander of a local fortress and certainly not the king of Armenia (i.e. not the Sasanian viceroy of this title, such as Hormizd or Narseh who both subsequently succeeded to be king of kings). According to the narrative, this disciple of Mani's, well-known from a number of other sources, healed a girl and by this miracle converted the king and many others. One striking theme is that the conversion is presented as away from the Christian religion to the true followers of Jesus, that is the religion of lord Mār Mani. If the story were historical it would have to be placed in the second half of the third century.

James Russell (2004a)[8] has argued that the site cannot have been Erevan as that place was a village of no importance at the time.[9] Instead, he draws attention to the Armenian legends of the apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew; in particular, the martyrdom of the latter at Arebanos. The location of this site, the name of which appears in a somewhat bewildering number of variations (Albanopolis, Urbanos etc.), has been the subject of numerous discussions but has never been resolved.[10] Russell suggests that the Mār Gabryab narrative is without historical value; rather it is a reworking of these other stories and full of literary topoi. More recently,

[6] CMC 146, 6-10 (perhaps .].ισθαρ).

[7] 18224, ed. Sundermann 1981 (text 3.4).

[8] See also further comments in Russell 2004c: 1304.

[9] However, Sundermann's identification is accepted as "most likely correct" by Kettenhofen/Bournoutian/Hewsen (1998); see also Asatrian 1995. The modern name is ultimately derived from that of the Urartian fortress of Erebuni.

[10] Michel van Esbroeck argued that Urbanopolis (etc.) was the Greek designation for Nikopolis in Pontus, but the sources he used were from much later and it is not clear how this would relate to Manichaean material including the Castellum Arabionis. Scholars continue to debate the problem (see van Esbroeck 1983). On the martyrdom of Bartholomew, see also Russell (2004b); and more generally Calzolari 2011.

Tamila Mgaloblishvili and Stephen Rapp have collated and discussed the various sources for Manichaean missions in the Caucasus and specifically Georgia (Mgaloblishvili/Rapp 2011). They concur with earlier scholars who had identified the king of Waručān, a convert according to community traditions, with a ruler in eastern Georgia or Iberia.[11] They are consequently more inclined to give the narrative about Mār Gabryab's mission to Armenia some historical weight as contemporary with Manichaean penetration into Iberia, although they do not make further comment on the location of Revān.

Evidence regarding Armenia: (4) Mani's Final Journeys

All of the above points are known to specialists; but I have sought to revisit this topic because my recent research on the Manichaean passion-narrative has caused me to question common assumptions about Mani's last days and suggested new lines of enquiry regarding his final journeys. The narrative cycle was known as *The Discourse about the Crucifixion* and was absolutely central to the community's faith and practice. It seems to have circulated in a number of different formats, and it is my ongoing editorial work on a version not previously available, found in the Coptic *Kephalaia* codex held at the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin[12] that has enabled new progress to be made on the topic.

Before the recovery of primary Manichaean texts scholars in the west were dependent on the early Christian polemical tradition represented by the *Acts of Archelaus*. This placed Mani in the mysterious fortress of Arabion near the border of the Roman Empire, and in the 19th and early 20th century it was common to locate it in Armenia by reference to the Arebanos of the Bartholomew legend. For example, Conybeare put it high on the Greater Zab river by the site of the St. Bartholomew monastery near

[11] The identities of King Habzā (Hbz') and the leader of the mission (Mani himself or a disciple?) have been the subject of considerable debate, but cannot be definitively resolved. For the text of M216b, M2230 and further comment, see Sundermann 1981: 24-25 (texts 2.3-4); for the Uighur U237+U296, see Zieme 1975: 50-52 (text 21).; also Lieu 1994.

[12] For an introduction to the codex (entitled *The Chapters of the Wisdom of my Lord Manichaios*) and detailed discussion of this theme with further references, see Iain Gardner, 'An Introduction to the Chester Beatty *Kephalaia* Codex' and 'Mani's Last Days', in Gardner/BeDuhn/Dilley 2015: 1-12, 159-208.

the modern town of Başkale (Conybeare 1898: cii-ciii). According to the story, after losing his public disputations with bishop Archelaus and earning the wrath of the local population, Mani fled back to his refuge at this place, and it was from there that he was subsequently apprehended. He was brought before the king who was inflamed with anger and desiring to avenge the deaths both of his own son and of the prison warden for which he blamed the fraudulent apostle. The king gave orders that Mani be flayed and hung before the gate of the city, his skin dipped in medicaments and inflated, and his flesh given to the birds.

It was the discovery of the community's own tradition preserved in texts written in Coptic and various Middle Iranian languages that caused the story as told in the *Acta* to be largely dismissed as a caricature of the true events. The 'fortress of Arabion' as Mani's refuge was now commonly supposed a fictional creation, and scholarly attention turned to locating the apostle in the historical landscapes of Sasanian Mesopotamia and Persia. The change occurred with the publication of the new texts and due to Walter Henning's reconstruction of a 'last journey' that took Mani from Ctesiphon north-east to Artemita (Kholassar), then south to Bēlapat (Gondēšāpūr) across the plain at the foot of the hills (i.e. rather than returning to the Tigris and south along the river) via Gaukhai in Bēṯ Darayē.

We can look briefly at one of the most evocative and frequently-cited of all the newly-recovered texts regarding Mani's persecution. This is the Middle Persian M3, presented as an eye-witness account by Nūḥzādag (Mani's interpreter?), Kuštai (his personal scribe) and Abzakhyā the Persian. The narrative opens with the king at dinner, when the courtiers enter to say that Mani has come and is waiting at the door. The apostle is made to wait.[13]

> *And (the king) stood up from his meal; and, putting one arm around the Queen of the Sakas and the other round Kirdīr the son of Ardavān, he came towards the lord. And his first words to the lord were: "You are not welcome!". The lord replied: "Why? What wrong have I done?". The king said: "I have sworn an oath not to let you come to this land". And in anger he spoke thus to the lord: "Ah, what need of you as you go neither fighting nor hunting ...".*

[13] From M3, text and translation (adapted) in Henning 1942.

The king is nowhere named in the text. The first editors presumed him to be Shapur; it was Henning in 1936 who identified him with Bahrām, and this has become standard in scholarship. However, one can hardly fail to note the king's intimate relationship with the Queen of the Sakas. She is Shapurduxt, daughter to Shapur, and thus sister to his sons including Hormizd, Bahrām and Narseh. In the complicated dynastic relationships of the early Sasanians, all three princes would succeed to the supreme throne in due course; but before they became 'king of kings' each had roles as viceroys of the sub-kingdoms within the empire such as Armenia, Gilān, Mesene, Sakastān and Turān.

The version of the 'Last Days' cycle in the Dublin *Kephalaia* suggests an alternate setting for this famous story. The narrative begins with an episode set at the summer palace of Hamadān during the reign of Hormizd. It is recounted how Mani and his companions made to approach the king who was staying there with his court. Then follows an elaborate sequence of greetings between the apostle and King Hormizd, which are passed through a series of intermediaries, both Mani's own disciples and members of the king's circle of dignitaries. Various persons are named, but the crucial point occurs when Bahrām the king of Gilān does not accept the greeting from Mani. This is presented as a calculated rebuff or snub by the future King Bahrām I who will soon come to succeed his brother Hormizd to the throne and be responsible for the death of the apostle. The episode concludes with a dialogue between Mani and his disciples about these events, which leads to a direct comparison to the life of Jesus, presumably on the theme of betrayal. Mani demands silence about these matters, for what is ordained to happen will happen. During this excursus to the narrative it is made apparent that the apostle was not always treated well by King Shapur; but of especial interest is an explicit reference to earlier persecution of the apostle by the latter's son Narseh, who at this stage was King of the Sakas and husband to Shapurduxt. He is said to have bound Mani in fetters and forced him to drink wine, though the apostle did not die on that occasion. This new evidence provides a better setting for the text M3, where the king rises from his dinner and puts his arm around the Queen of the Sakas; he is not named directly because the identification is implied by what follows.

Thus, Mani's problems with the Sasanian dynasty began already during the reign of Shapur, and there is good reason to think that he was subject to various impositions upon his movement and his mission for several years before his final fateful arrest. We have read explicit evidence of direct physical persecution by Narseh. The telescoping of events into a single fateful journey that brought Mani to his climactic final ordeal before the king needs to be carefully reconsidered, especially in view of the obvious imperatives of liturgical commemoration and the parallels drawn with the Christian passion week. The idea that there was one single 'last journey' by which the apostle arrived at the imperial city should be resisted. This was Henning's phrase, and affecting though it is there are good reasons to reject his reconstruction, which has unduly influenced all later discussions. The ground-breaking research paper, published in 1942 (Henning 1942), was based on an attempt to reconcile the itinerary related in *The Section of the Narrative about the Crucifixion* (a Coptic text published by Polotsky in 1934) and Middle Iranian fragments of the 'Last Days' cycle upon which Henning himself was working.[14] One can readily imagine the excitement with which this new material would have been greeted, and there was also a web of personal relationships. Henning had become engaged to Maria Polotsky in Berlin in 1936, and the events in Germany that would drive his friend and her brother Hans Jakob to settle in the Palestinian Mandate (and ultimately to a Chair at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem) also encouraged him to accept the Lectureship in Iranian Studies previously held by Bailey at the School of Oriental Studies. Walter Henning and Maria Polotsky were married in London in 1937. By the time 'Mani's Last Journey' was published he was in Cambridge where the newly-created SOAS had been temporarily relocated.

Henning and Polotsky were remarkable scholars and formidable philologists. Still, it is possible to make improvements to their editions, and the passing of time with the recovery of new texts makes it opportune to reconsider these events. My argument is both temporal and geographic. As regards the first, it makes better sense of the sources to suppose that

[14] In particular the travels recounted in Coptic *Homs*. 44,10 - 45,9 (= *Manichäische Homilien*, ed. Hans Jakob Polotsky, Stuttgart, W. Kohlhammer, 1934), and in the Parthian fragments M6031 and 6033 known to Henning as T ii D 163.

Mani's travels took place over a longer period of time than implied by the thesis of the 'last journey'. In the *Bēma* psalm 226 (i.e. part of the liturgical cycle associated with commemoration of the passion) the apostle himself is given to say that he spent six years wandering like a captive before the day of the cross. Further, in the final confrontation with Bahrām as recorded in Polotsky's edition of the Coptic text, the king specifically refers to three years that Mani has travelled in the company of a certain Baat. In the Parthian fragments this person is given the title of *šahrdār* (*šhrd'r*), i.e. a high-ranking noble, perhaps a provincial ruler or vassal-king. The three years will be the entirety of the new king's reign before which there was a sojourn among the Assyrians to which Hormizd had sentenced him with Mousak. I suggest that Mani's voyage up the Tigris from Mesene to Ctesiphon, which is also recorded in the text published by Polotsky, occurred at around the start of Bahrām's reign and preceded the three years he spent with Baat whom he seems to have joined at or after he left the Twin-Cities travelling north.

My geographical reconstruction is more controversial. The Coptic texts repeatedly link Mani and Baat together and with travel to a place or occasion given as *t-hermēn*(*e*)*ia*; apparently the same as the Graeco-Coptic word meaning 'interpretation'. This has occasioned substantial discussion; but I have recently argued in detail that we have no sensible alternative other than to read this as a rendering of the toponym Armenia.[15] Further, I have suggested that this reorientation of Mani's travels during Bahrām's reign to the north provides an opportunity to reconcile the evidence of the Coptic sources as preserved by the community itself with the parody presented in the *Acts of Archelaus*. With a longer time-frame and a careful re-reading of the texts, the evidence supports a three-year sojourn north of Mesopotamia when Mani was placed under the protection of the vassal-king Baat. The latter would have been subject to Narseh who with the accession of Bahrām to the supreme throne had now been invested as King of Sasanian Armenia. Nevertheless, the apostle was able to turn this difficult situation to some advantage because at his subsequent trial in Bēlapat we read:

[15] Gardner 2015: 187-195. My on-going editorial work continues to convince me of this argument.

As soon as the king (*Bahrām*) *saw* (*Mani*), [*his face*] *convulsed with angry laughter. He spoke to him* (*a torrent*) *of words: "Look, for three* [*whole*] *years* [*you*] *have been travelling with Baat. What law is it that you have* [*taught*] *him, so that he has left our* (*law*) *behind him and taken up yours for his own? He* (*returned?*) *to Armenia: Why did you not go with* [*him*] *– as I ordered you to go with* [*him*] *– nor again come with him?". My* [*lord* (*Mani*)] *understood immediately that the matter was being stretched for an excuse ...*

In this pivotal passage it is made clear that Mani was able to convert Baat to his own teaching away from Mazdayasnian tradition of the court, and that at a certain point he had managed to separate himself from Baat's guardianship.

There remains the question of the historicity and location of the Castellum Arabionis. There are a series of curious intersections between the Armenian Bartholomew legend and the narrative of Mani's martyrdom, especially in the gruesome details of the deaths of the two apostles; as well as with Mār Gabryab's mission to Revān as discussed earlier. It is hard to avoid the idea that these are all somehow the same place; but the location of Arebanos is a notorious problem. The details of Mani's final years in Armenia remain frustratingly elusive, with the relevant passages in the Coptic versions of the 'Last Days' cycle all very poorly preserved, and the parody that is the *Acts of Archelaus* difficult to interpret. Whether there is any truth in the supposed mission into Roman territory that forms the core of that work I cannot say. We also do not know why Mani turned south again into Mesopotamia. The *Acts* assert his eventual arrest at the fortress of Arabion, but the account in the Dublin *Kephalaia* codex indicates that the apostle journeyed through Susiana in the company of his own disciples, and that it was only at the edge of Susa itself that he was detained and summonsed before King Bahrām in Bēlapat.

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